

Insight

Food, wit, art and building the town; Modernizing the idea of the great French salons elegant gatherings of intelligentsia a Toronto businessman's soirees are provoking thought about how city and country can be run

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A Feb. 21 column about the emergence of salons in Toronto incorrectly stated that Rocco Achampong, a Toronto mayoralty candidate, was "booted out" of office while president of University of Toronto's Students' Administrative Council. In fact, Achampong was not removed from that office. In 2003, the SAC board voted 31-8 in favour of his resignation but he completed his term and did not run for re-election. 20100224

"Pierre, darling, bring me another glass of champagne," says the décolletaged, reclining lady, a blue-stockings regular at one of the salons held in Paris, prior to the Revolution. "I can't bear to listen to another word from that pompous lout Voltaire rattling on about the Church . . . I need my senses dulled."

Salons in Paris were meant for serious discussion, for introduction of great literature, for meetings of the political and social, rich and poor. And for argument.

Attendees had to have a brilliant mind. The salons were soires d'esprit for intellectuals: writers such as Voltaire, philosophers such as Rousseau, encyclopedists such as Diderot, the brilliant Madame de Stael and her mother Madame Necker, wife of the finance minister to Louis XVI.

The English had no salons, only coffee houses.

There, ladies, at least those with reputations, had to stay home.

In Canada, as in England, there has rarely been the practice of the salon, but that changed when **Amzi Haq**, a foreign-born politico, believed Toronto needed one: a place to wine and dine and talk about issues of importance to the city and the world.

To think and have fun concurrently.

"It's my little humble way to bring people together," says Haq.

He invites anyone "who has something to say that is close to our heart and close to our country."

That may include spiels from politicians, such as former foreign affairs minister Pierre Pettigrew, and also musicians such as John Switzer, writer and director Michelle Mama, and Michael Taylor, an expert in the architecture and life of Frank Gehry.

"I would say it's 50 per cent political and 50 per cent other walks of life," says Haq, who once worked as a federal secretary to assassinated Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto and also as chief of strategy for George Smitherman. "The first focus really is an absolute dialogue and conversation about the city where I live."

The speakers are not paid, the food is free - usually Haq cooks - and invitees are asked only to bring a bottle of their favourite wine.

"This is part of my Eastern tradition where you bring food and break bread," explains Haq, who now works in

international business development.

So it means you must enjoy slightly epic Indian-style food, you must not mind sitting in a loft-style apartment in downtown Toronto, and you may find friends of Haq's at the salon because the whole idea started when he began to cook dinners for his friends - a way to create family in a foreign country.

He also engages a team of volunteers who serve wine, help clean up, and usher people to their seats.

There were about 50 people at the salon on Wednesday, seated in the Haq apartment on tiny Camden street deep in downtown Toronto. They came to hear politician John Tory, former head of the provincial Progressive Conservatives and at one time a possible mayoral candidate for Toronto. They wanted to understand his views of the city and what changes he would make if he could.

Haq invites lots of students, since he feels they are the future and need to be able to express their views. "The idea is to give them the feeling that they do have a say."

Then up pops Rocco Achampong, a mayoralty candidate, a lawyer, who tells me bluntly he is just looking for a little ink. His main schtick: "I'm upset at how piss poor the decision-making process has been in this city." Aren't we all. But we are also reminded that Achampong's former student colleagues at the University of Toronto Students' Administrative Council booted him out as president. Let's go get another drink.

John Tory is slated to speak soon and then we can eat.

Haq introduces Tory by noting that when he was leader of the opposition at Queen's Park (and Haq got to observe, as Smitherman's consultant), he hated cellphones ringing as he spoke.

But Tory, in his grey argyle sweater, grey suit and pale blue shirt (is the argyle supposed to make him look relaxed?) regales the crowd with a story about how Ted Rogers, his former boss, phoned him on his BlackBerry at all hours; he had to keep the device on at all times.

Then he gets into the serious stuff: how the city needs to expand and fix the TTC; how disadvantaged neighbourhoods need to be radically improved; how the economy should be a major concern for the region; how the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be narrowed.

"I am a fiscal conservative," Tory says. "I'm a business person. I just believe you owe it to the city residents to operate the city in an efficient manner."

And the present budget with its 4 per cent increase in property tax does not do that, he argues, because it doesn't take into account future tax problems and future immigration.

He goes on for 45 minutes. The crowd is receptive and exceptionally polite but they are hungry.

Luckily the food is ready - pureed spinach, the various stews of chicken, the potatoes and peas and naan bread. This evening Haq didn't cook, but had the spread catered.

It is cookie time: time for questions for Tory. He doesn't add much more than we've already heard, and as he closes I head toward Mark Smithyes, 41, who works for a pharmaceutical company. He is in conversation with Daniel Carbin, 31, the age gap here being part of the effect Haq tries to create with his invitations.

"It's a great connection to ideas," says Smithyes..

"This exchange of ideas represents a personal growth for me and it is very stimulating," he says.

Salim Dhanani, 22, is one of the students who was invited. He studies economics and psychology at U of T.

"Where else would I get a chance to meet someone of importance in Toronto and ask questions?" he says.

I then gravitate to Linda Chu, 54, one of the few women in the room and one who frequently attends these salons.

She is in the real estate business, and met Haq at a fundraiser for Smitherman.

Chu comes to hear "a perspective on the city that I wouldn't normally hear about. It's a chance to ask questions of someone you may never get a chance to meet."

The Paris salon, writes Maria Fairweather, author of a biography of Madame de Stael, "exercised enormous influence on French thought and culture throughout the eighteenth century . . .

"Conversation was cultivated; wit and brilliance were considered as important as wisdom and knowledge; formal manners were imposed and practised, but without the stultifying boredom and rigid protocol of the court."

The salon tradition was reignited through other centuries because it was so much fun, intellectually and pour l'estomac.

On Wednesday in Toronto - a city in need of both fun and ideas - Haq had the joi de vivre and politesse to pull off his meeting with civility. We have our very own salonniere. Salon continued on IN4

1331286-946574.jpg | photo: VINCE TALOTTA toronto starA salon reading of Moliere, as depicted in a 1728 painting by Jean Francois de Troy. Now, will ideas from 21st-century salons emerge to modernize a Toronto in need? SHUTTERSTOCK TORONTO STAR photo illustrationN SALON NIGHT, last Wednesday, at **Amzi Haq's** loft: the idea has an illustrious history. | ;

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